(d) The steps being taken by Government to boost export of agricultural products include:

1. Providing assistance for raising small and large nurseries for production of good quality planting material, upgradation of technical knowhow of farmers through demonstrations, trainings and publicity, rejuvenation of old orchards, area expansion, supply of minikits for vegetables, improving productivity and training of farmers.
2. Grant of financial assistance for improved packaging, strengthening of quality control and modernization of processing units.
3. Eastablishment of vapour heat treatment facilities for eliminating pest incubation in the product especially the mangoes for gaining access to overseas markets.
4. Grant of Air Freight Subsidy for exports of floricultural items and select fresh fruits and vegetables.
5. Arranging promotional campaigns such as buyer-seller meets and participation in important international fairs and exhibitions.
6. Setting up of integrated cargo handling and cold storage facilities at various International Airports for handling export of perishable items such as flowers, fresh fruits and vegetables.
7. Providing assistance in development of data base and dissemination of market information.
8. Providing assistance for setting up of laboratories for testing products to ensure quality, eliminating contamination and ensuring freedom from Sacteria and fungi.'

Reduction in Subsidy

5199. SHRI J. CHITHARANJAN: Will the Minister of COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that Government have directed the Rubber Board to reduce the subsidy given for planting and replanting the rubber plants and also on fertilizers and pesticides;

(b) if so, what was the quantum of reduction on these items; and

(c) what are the reasons that prompted Government to reduce the subsidy?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (SHRI MURASOLI MARAN): (a) and (c) As a result of zero based budget exercise of the Government of India, the rates of subsidy under Rubber Plantation Development Scheme have been reduced from Rs. 18,000 per ha. in traditional areas and Rs. 22,000 per ha. in non-traditional areas to Rs. 12,000 per ha. and Rs. 16,000 per ha. respectively.

The subsidy for fertilizers and fungicides available under Productivity Enhancement Scheme has not been reduced.

Decline in Prices of Natural Rubber

5200. SHRI J. CHITHARANJAN: Will the Minister of COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that various measures taken so far has failed to stall the fall in prices of natural rubber;

(b) if so, the details thereof and reasons therefor; and

(c) whether Government will consider procuring 50,000 tonnes of natural rubber to stall the further fall in prices?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY (SHRI MURASOLI MARAN): (a) and (b) As a result of various steps taken by the Government to arrest the decline in the prices of natural rubber, the prices have considerably improved in the last few months and are at present ranging between Rs. 3300-3400 per quintal.

(c) To further improve the domestic prices of rubber, Government have decided to continue the procurement of natural rubber upto 20,000 MT for supply against Advance Licence.

Embargo on Import of American Soda Ash

5201. SHRI R.S. GAVAI: Will the Minister of COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have put 'de facto embargo' on import of American Soda Ash as a result of a temporary injunction imposed by MRTPC in 1996;

(b) whether US Trade Representative has asked for lifting the 'embargo';

(c) if so, the details thereof; and